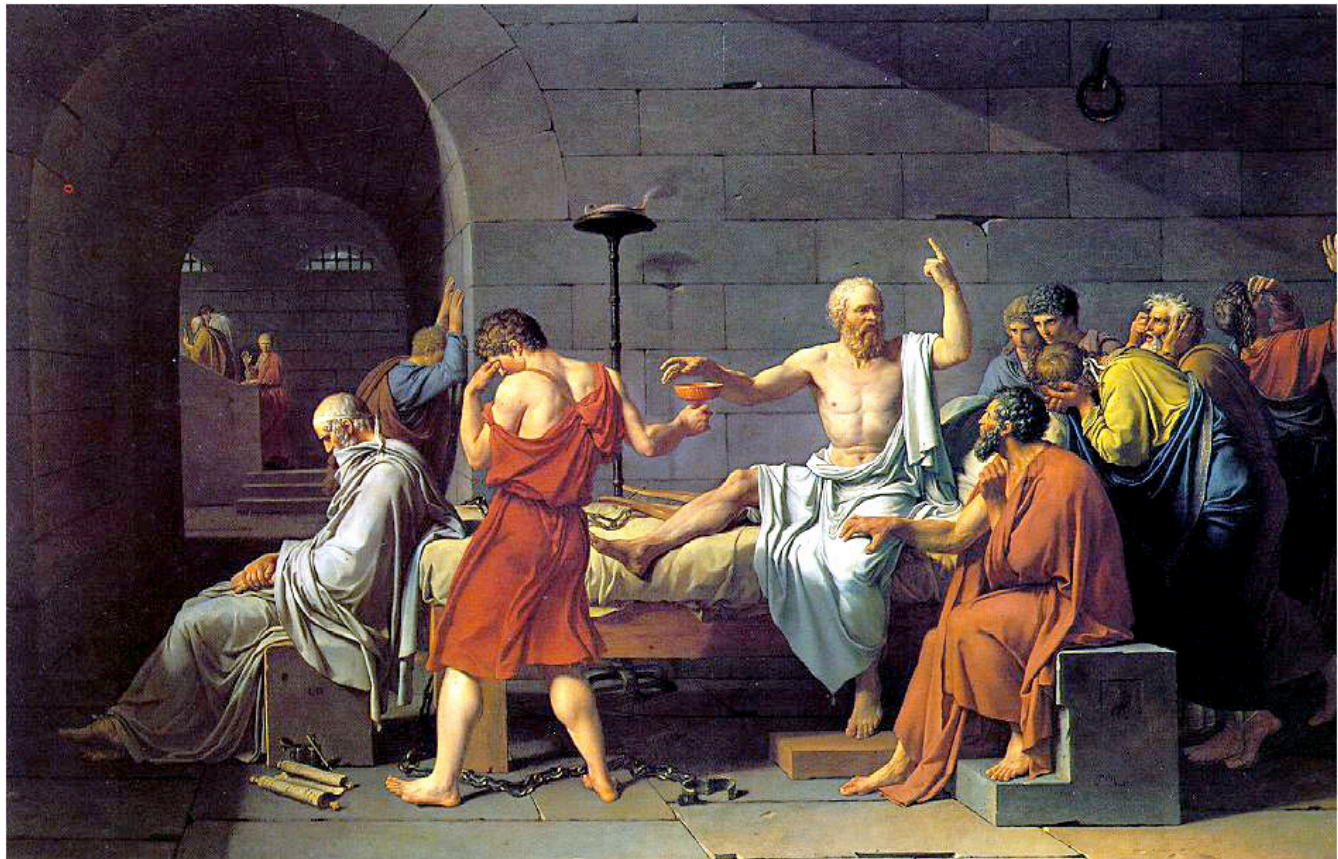


PHILOSOPHY 20A

History of Ancient Greek Philosophy



ABOUT THE COURSE...

Some Guiding Questions

- ◉ What is philosophy?
- ◉ What is *ancient* Greek philosophy?
- ◉ Why study ancient Greek philosophy?
- ◉ How will we go about studying ancient Greek philosophy in this course?

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

A Brief Overview

“Love of wisdom” (Greek) *philos* + *sophia*

Is this helpful? What does it mean to love wisdom?

“Philosophy begins in wonder...” (Socrates)

Although this statement might seem unrevealing, I think we can use Socrates’ statement as plausible starting point towards one way of characterizing the discipline.

Two things that philosophers are generally in agreement about when it comes to characterizing the discipline of philosophy is (1) the *subject matter* of philosophical inquiry and (2) the *method* of philosophical inquiry.

So, using Socrates’ statement as a model, we might put things this way: philosophy is the discipline that considers (or wonders about) certain kinds of things in a certain kind of way.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The Nature & Method of Philosophy

Well then, what is the *subject matter* and *method* of philosophy? What sorts of things do philosophers typically wonder about? And how do they typically carry out their wondering about those things?

The way that I like to answer the subject matter question is to say that philosophers wonders about the *BIG issues/questions*. That is, the *most fundamental* issues/questions that one can consider.

What's a *BIG* (i.e. *fundamental*) issue/question? How about those issues/questions that lie at the bottom of (or serve as the basis for) every other issue/question that one can ask.

Traditionally, these sorts of fundamental issues/questions have been grouped in terms of various domains (or sub-branches) of philosophical inquiry...

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The Nature & Method of Philosophy

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that considers the *nature of Reality*. What is real? Is appearance reality? Is anything stable or permanent, or is reality always changing?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that considers the *nature of Knowledge*. What is knowledge? What's the difference between knowledge and opinion? How do we come to know what we know? Can we know anything at all?

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that considers the *nature of Morality*. How should I live? What makes an act moral or immoral? Are there moral absolutes or is the truth of moral principles a relative matter?

Logic is the branch of philosophy that considers the *nature of Correct Reasoning*. What's the correct way to reason? How can we differentiate between correct and incorrect reasoning? Are the principles of correct reasoning universal and normative?¹⁸

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The Nature & Method of Philosophy

Now that we (hopefully) have a better idea about the particular *subject matter* of philosophical inquiry, it's time to say a few things about the particular *method* of philosophical inquiry– that is, how philosophers typically carry out their wonderings.

Generally speaking, the way in which philosophers tend to consider the BIG issues/questions involves *constructing and evaluating arguments* that have to do with the BIG issues/questions.

Undoubtedly, unpacking the notion of 'constructing and evaluating arguments' will take some time to do. But for now, even without spelling out those details, I think that we have everything that we need in order to provide an adequate answer to our initial question.

So, what is philosophy? One plausible answer that I'd like to suggest is the following: *Philosophy is the discipline that considers the BIG issues/questions by means of constructing and evaluating arguments that have to do with the BIG issues/questions.*

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY?

What makes ancient philosophy ancient?

In this course we will be considering the way in which certain philosophers from a particular historical, cultural and linguistic context have wondered about the BIG issues/questions.

After a brief survey of the so-called Pre-Socratic philosophers, the course will focus primarily on the philosophical positions central to the thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The last two weeks of the course will be devoted to a short consideration of Hellenistic philosophy.

So although the emphasis throughout the course will be focused on understanding, analyzing, and evaluating the various arguments put forward by these philosophers, it's crucially important that we recognize (and not forget) that these philosophers are ancient philosophers, from a different historical era, who lived in a different cultural context and spoke a different language.

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY?

Why study these 'dead' philosophers?

However, just because these philosophers (and their ideas) may seem 'ancient' at times, it would be wrong to think that their philosophical contributions are now antiquated and unhelpful.

On the contrary, their philosophical influence and legacy are monumental...

"The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato" (Alfred North Whitehead)



ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY?

How will we do it?

Generally speaking, in this course we will be approaching things 'dialectically'. The word 'dialectic' comes from the Greek *dialegesthai* which means 'to converse'.

Understood in this sense, the history of ancient Greek philosophy can be approached/considered as a back and forth 'conversation' between thinkers who respond to each other.

I think doing things this way engages us in their 'dialogue'. And as such, our approach in this course will be much more hands on as opposed to a mere accumulation of facts about these ancient philosophers and their ideas about the BIG issues/questions.